

which results in a somewhat demure analysis of chaste and idealised love. Given that Galen's theory of extramission was still popular in the Middle Ages – whereby the active rays of the eye functioned as a kind of *pneuma* that both *lit* and *felt* the world – an opportunity was perhaps lost here to draw out a loaded conflation of sight and touch.

These exceptions notwithstanding, most of the objects on display here are unlikely to be the first thing you notice upon entering each room. Bold golden quotations emblazon cobalt blue walls; incense, myrrh and other assorted fragrances permeate throughout; the quixotic sounds of birdsong and bells resonate on a loop, and visitors are encouraged to 'touch' (medieval-style) rosary beads and chess sets. Even without the curator's lament to a local newspaper that visitors could not also 'lick the works of art', these systematic overtures to the audible, the olfactory, and the tactile feel a little bit too on the (Aristotelian) nose.⁵ In a similar vein, one wall text on medieval gardens reads: 'Secluded from the chaos and filth of cities [. . .] perfumed with the aromas of flowers [. . .] resonating with gurgling fountains and singing birds [. . .] [they] evoked the beauty and harmony of God's primeval orchard.' Access to such havens though, like most of the objects found here, would have been severely restricted to all but the narrowest elites. Thus, another regrettable but unavoidable implication of this exhibition is that pleasurable sensations were somehow absent from the lives of ordinary people, who, at one and the same time, were also living dirty and anarchic existences (as per the all too common stereotype).

That there is next to nothing, moreover, to represent the early Middle Ages, the Emirate of Córdoba, the Balkans, Scandinavia, the

Orthodox Church and especially Islam, makes for further questions regarding *which* 'Medieval Europe' we are supposed to be (re-)experiencing here. If many of these spaces cater for very pleasant encounters today – and they do – then a selectively wistful picture of the past (something that the exhibition purposefully aimed to complicate) that is altogether too simple, too Latinate, and ultimately too modern in respect to thinking and framing the 'medieval' senses, still seems to have been advanced.

- 1 Aristotle, *De Anima*, trans. R. D. Hicks, New York, 2008, pp. 73–112.
- 2 William Langland, *Piers Plowman: The C Version*, trans. George Economou, London, 1996, p. 94.
- 3 See Johan Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, Chicago, 1996; Lucien Febvre, 'Sensibility and History: How to Reconstitute the Emotional Life of the Past', in Peter Burke (ed.), *A New Kind of History: From the Writings of Febvre*, trans. K. Folca, New York, 1973, pp. 12–26; Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso (eds.), *Senses of Place*, Woodbridge, 1999.
- 4 See, especially, Richard G. Newhauser (ed.), *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Middle Ages*, London, 2016.
- 5 Mary Carole McCauley, 'Walters Art Museum Exhibit "Feast for the Senses" Immerses Visitors in Medieval Europe', *The Baltimore Sun*, October 15, 2016.

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Christian Mieves and Irene Brown (eds), *Wonder in Contemporary Artistic Practice*, Routledge, New York and London, 2017, 308 pages, hardback, ISBN 9781138855816, £95.00.

Wonder thrives as a theme in contemporary art today. Since 2000, exhibitions on the topic have proliferated and the *Wunderkammer*, or

cabinet of curiosities, has also been explored as a concept and revived as a mode of display in numerous art and exhibition contexts. This timely edited volume responds to this 'urge for wonder in the twenty-first century' and while having interdisciplinary appeal, its focus is on the 'renewed critical relevance of wonder in contemporary art since the new millennium' (pp. 3 and 10).

The book has origins in Irene Brown's *Gallery of Wonder* project, which began in 2010, where artists explored wonder in display spaces at Newcastle University and the Great North Museum, as well as the *Working Wonder* conference organised by the book's editors in 2013. This exploratory publication is particularly notable due to the practice-based reflections it offers. Wonder and contemporary interpretations of the *Wunderkammer* are considered in relation to curatorial and artistic practice in dedicated sections, featuring texts written by practitioners themselves.

Rather than trying to pin wonder down, the editors rightly observe its widely acknowledged ambiguity. As such, their book includes various approaches to wonder and diverse topics are addressed across the sixteen essays, ranging from snow globes to human skulls. Despite the eclecticism of the subject matter, many texts are unified by their consideration of the ethical and political potential of wonder, reflecting recent scholarship in other disciplines. Theorists including Jane Bennett and Marguerite La Caze have identified the capacity for wonder to prompt the development of an ethical sensibility.¹ Furthermore, Sophia Vasalou has suggested that wonder might move us in such a way that it alters our world-view, motivating us to act in accordance with this transformed outlook.² As Alistair Robinson

observes in this volume, '[a]rtists have turned to wonder [. . .] to enrich their political and social critiques' (p. 140). Accordingly, a number of essays explore how wonder might be harnessed strategically through creative practice towards these ends.

Runette Kruger examines wonder's 'subversive' potential and considers how it serves an ethical function in encounters with difference. Through an analysis of the politically inflected work of the artist-designer Felieke van der Leest and two street art collectives, Kruger suggests that wonder might 'make it possible to envisage and momentarily experience a new, gentler, world order' and to abide more 'meaningfully with the unfathomable' (pp. 80 and 85). Marion Endt-Jones examines wonder in relation to *Coral: Something Rich and Strange* (Manchester Museum, 29 November 2013 – 16 March 2014). Doubt and wonder – in part brought about by coral's perceived ambiguity and ecological vulnerability – were both mobilised in this exhibition. Endt-Jones recognises wonder's potential to induce compassionate action, suggesting that in this context wonder might provoke a desire to protect coral and the biodiverse reef ecosystems currently threatened by anthropogenic activity. Celina Jeffery also considers the destruction of the natural world and the affective potential of wonder. In relation to *Preternatural* (2011–2012) and *Hold On* (2011), Jeffery observes how artists responded to these exhibitions' themes with works that 'register and elicit affective and empathic response to ecological distress' (p. 202). Elsewhere, it has been suggested that wonder arises due to a 'change in the environment' and that the recent revival of cabinets of curiosities in museums and galleries 'speaks to our own

vexed relationship with the natural world, at a time when we seem bent on destroying it'.³ In light of the precarious ecological circumstances in which we find ourselves, these propositions seem convincing and the ecological slant of these two essays is accordingly apposite.

For Jane Bennett, enchantment – or 'wonder-at-the-world' – impels our connection to earthly existence, providing 'an essential component of an ethical, ecologically aware life'.⁴ Yet Will Buckingham's essay suggests that wonder may not be necessary to bring these things about. Considering the predominantly Western context of many of the exhibitions, artworks and texts that have focussed on wonder lately, Buckingham's essay is an intriguing contribution to this volume. He examines wonder – or rather its lack – in relation to a fourth-century Chinese tale in which the diviner and natural historian, Guo Pu, encounters a strange, novel and unknown beast, later described as a 'donkey-rat'. Buckingham became intrigued, since he discerned no evidence of wonder in this story as conceived in the West, despite recognising circumstances that might provoke it. Attributing this absence to a view of the world that is ontologically flat, whereby entities exist alongside one another in their diversity with no hierarchy of higher/lower or wonderful/banal, Buckingham warns of wonder's risks: that regarding only certain things (or beings) with wonder risks apathy towards everything failing to elicit this response, and moreover, that seeking wonder in everything is simply exhausting. However, he concludes that living without wonder 'is not to live in a world of drabness. It is instead to find ways [...] in which we see ourselves as an equal part of a community of beings, astonishing

in their diversity' (p. 69). This recognition of creaturely coexistence might similarly lead to the cultivation of an ethical sensibility, inciting compassion towards the abundant variety of earthly life of which we are a part, even if, according to Buckingham, wonder need not prevail.

Buckingham explores wonder in a literary context yet other topics tackled in relation to visual art include clouds, the Claude glass and the idea of a photographic *Wunderkammer*. Considering this variety, readers might expect something by way of conclusion at the book's close. Yet the absence of this summing-up seems to be a strategic move by the editors in light of the volume's theme. This book does not claim to be a comprehensive survey of wonder in contemporary artistic and curatorial practice, nor does it seek to present a single answer as to why wonder is emerging today or how it should be understood. Instead, the editors have offered an insight into some of the ways wonder is being explored through creative practice, encouraging and contributing to the debate on wonder in this context. In this way, like wonder itself, the book keeps inquiry open rather than closing it down, at a time when this field of artistic and curatorial activity continues to flourish.

- 1 Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings and Ethics*, New Jersey, 2001; Marguerite La Caze, 'The Encounter Between Wonder and Generosity', in *Hypatia*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2002, pp. 1–19.
- 2 Sophia Vasalou, *Wonder: A Grammar*, New York, 2015, pp. 20–21.
- 3 John Onians, 'I Wonder: A Short History of Amazement', in John Onians (ed.), *Sight and Insight: Essays on Art and Culture in Honour of E.H. Gombrich at 85*, London, 1994, pp. 11–33, p. 24; Philip Hoare, 'Museum and gallery curators reopen the cabinet of curiosities concept', *The Guardian* (13 January 2014), <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/>

jan/13/cabinet-curiosities-taxidermy-retro-museums
(accessed 4 April 2017), para. 4 of 15.

4 Bennett, op. cit., pp. 32, 99 and 156.

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‘Opus Anglicanum: Masterpieces of English Medieval Embroidery’, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 1 October 2016 – 5 February 2017. Catalogue: Eds. Clare Browne, Glyn Davies and M. A. Michael, with the assistance of Michaela Zöschg, Yale University Press in association with the Victoria and Albert Museum, New Haven and London, 2016, 310 pages, hardback, ISBN 9780300222005, £40.00.

The magnificent linen Bologna Cope (cat. 38), made of silver and cream coloured threads, portrays biblical and passion narratives inside Gothic arches. Bathed in light, this cope was the first object to welcome visitors to the Victoria and Albert Museum’s (V&A) retrospective of English embroidery from the twelfth to fifteenth centuries: ‘Opus Anglicanum: Masterpieces of English Medieval Embroidery’. The exhibition’s Latin title translates as ‘English work’, but in continental medieval records it referred to luxurious embroidered textiles produced in England, characterized by underside couching and fine split stitch. London, especially the area around Saint Paul’s Cathedral, was the centre of this trade, which reached its apogee between the second half of the thirteenth century and the middle of the fourteenth. It was a craft appreciated and exported throughout Europe, sought

after by ecclesiastics, royalty such as Isabella of France (Queen of England, 1308–1327) and upper class members of society. In 1246, the Benedictine chronicler Matthew Paris tells an anecdote about Pope Innocent IV, who wrote to English Cistercian abbots requesting such vestments.¹ This enthusiasm is also reflected in a Vatican inventory from 1295, where more than 113 *opus anglicanum* are listed.² Owning such pieces of craftsmanship was thus a symbol of wealth and social status.

The exhibition, ordered chronologically, was divided into seven sections: ‘Bishops and Burials’, ‘The Making of Medieval Embroidery’, ‘The Royal Court at Westminster’, ‘International Renown’, ‘The Age of Chivalry’, ‘New Directions’ and ‘Survival and Rediscovery’. These sections, and consequently the catalogue, tried to thoroughly cover the major aspects of *opus anglicanum*, such as their production (chapter 1), use (chapter 2), dissemination (chapters 3, 4 and 5), evolution (chapters 6 and 7) and rediscovery (afterword).

Among the most precious pieces on display were the fourteenth-century funeral achievements of Edward of Woodstock (1330–1376), son of Edward III and later known as the Black Prince (cat. 65). Woodstock was deemed by his contemporaries to be one the finest English army commanders and his personal military habiliments or ‘achievements’ are a rare example of secular embroidery. The exhibition displayed his surcoat and shield, embroidered with heraldic lions and fleurs-de-lys, against a dark wall which contrasted with the now faded colours of the material. Next to these was the small enameled Dunstable Swan Jewel (cat. 70), intended as a heraldic ornament. In fact, the V&A showcased many other media alongside